

The Public's Agenda

By Tom Layzell

“Kentucky’s economic well-being is inextricably linked to the education and skills of its citizens. The relationship between educational excellence and economic growth is more critical today than it has ever been.”

**The Business Forum on Kentucky Education,
August, 2005**

Across the nation, policy makers, elected officials, business and community leaders recognize the strong link that exists between vibrant economies and increased rates of college completion, and they are stepping up efforts to improve educational quality and opportunity.

We are fortunate in Kentucky that our policy makers have taken up the challenge of education reform directly and forcefully – first with landmark K-12 legislation in 1990, then seven years later with passage of the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act, and finally in 2000 with sweeping statutory changes in our adult education system. Together, they represent Kentucky’s “line in the sand” against the low educational expectations that have historically kept this state from achieving its full potential.

Without doubt, we are making progress. At our May meeting, the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) announced a preliminary 12 percent increase in the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded this spring at the public universities. Our college-going rate for recent high school students now exceeds the national average. Our

GED on-to-postsecondary rate has increased from 12 percent to 19 percent since 1998.

We are enrolling more students at all levels of postsecondary and adult education and we are getting more of them out the door with a degree or diploma in hand.

Kentucky is improving, but we have a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the nation. Be assured, the nation – in fact the world – is not standing still. Kentucky must accelerate efforts to educate more of our citizens, and educate them at higher levels than ever before if we are to have a chance at competing for the quality jobs that lead to a higher quality of life.

According to recent analysis by the CPE, just to get to the national average in educational attainment by 2020, Kentucky must double the number of adults with bachelor's degrees from approximately 400,000 to 800,000 people. This is a monumental undertaking, and it will require the combined resources and talents of many to achieve this goal. So, what is our plan? How are we going to meet the educational challenges that lie ahead?

First, we must ensure that our postsecondary institutions are accessible to all of our citizens, including adult learners, lower-income populations, first-generation students, and minority citizens. This means better outreach, access to financial aid, innovative course delivery, improved advising and support services, and greater opportunities for transfer among institutions.

Second, we must expand our partnerships with our K-12 system. The hard truth is that not enough of our high school graduates are prepared for postsecondary level work. Too many students require remedial courses in English and mathematics once they get to college, and as a result, often drop out of the system. We must improve efforts to align

college expectations and high school programs. We must also ensure that quality teacher preparation is among our highest university priorities.

Third, we must commit ourselves to improving the quality and productivity of our institutions and ensure our graduates are prepared for life and work. This includes providing targeted investments to support statewide goals. During the past two budget cycles, Kentucky taxpayers have supported significant increases in funding for postsecondary operating budgets. Our campuses are putting these resources to good use, but there is no question that each institution will have to operate at peak efficiency if we are to reach our educational attainment goal.

Fourth, postsecondary education must fully embrace our role as stewards of our regions. This means partnering with local business to address education needs. It means building our research capacity to generate new ideas and products, and it means working with local governments, schools, and non-profits to help address a range of social needs.

Achieving our common goal – the public’s agenda – to reach the national average in educational attainment by 2020 will not be easy, quick or cheap, but it must be done. The future well-being of this Commonwealth depends on it.

About the author:

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